

## Oceanic Destiny - I

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India is a prominent member of several regional associations and supra-regional groupings like SAARC, ASEAN Regional Forum, Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), East Asia Summit (EAS), South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), Mekong-Ganga Cooperation and Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IORARC). This is in addition to India's membership of several global and transcontinental organisations like United Nations, Commonwealth, G-20, G-77, BRICS, etc. and being a full dialog partner of ASEAN and an observer in Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Some of the entities, like ASEM, EAS or IORARC, have not seen much activity in recent times, and some, like SAARC, have practically achieved nothing in so many decades of their existence, except indulging in occasional exercises in symbolism and tokenism. After isolating Pakistan last year, the forum itself has now become practically defunct. SAARC has never been a great integrating force within South Asia; in fact, the kind of integration that has transformed the socio-economic and political landscapes in Europe and other continents still remains a distant dream in South Asia, despite having an almost infinite potential for cooperation in infrastructure, creation of energy grids and transport networks, for erecting common architectures for handling intra-regional security and harnessing river potentials to improve the lives of people.

The time has indeed come to explore and harness the strengths of other supra regional groupings, by tapping into the synergies that flow from historical and cultural bonds. For India, one such group that is vital to our geo-strategic and economic goals is the group of Indian Ocean countries. However, caught in the stranglehold of stagnation in thinking, political leaders and opinion makers have so far neglected to examine the socio-cultural and economic bonds of these countries with India— bonds which were forged by history through centuries of maritime trade, as well as religious and political affiliations. These bonds still remain strong and vibrant, and cherished in many of these countries. As the former external affairs minister Mr. S M Krishna had stated in 2011, Indian Ocean remains “an integral part of our collective destiny, and we need a holistic vision for a co-operative response to the challenges in the region”.

There are 59 countries in the rim of Indian Ocean spanning a total length of 63000 kms, of which 21 countries now constitute the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IORARC) – with 7 more countries (including USA, China, UK, France, Japan and Germany) being the dialog partners. These 21 countries, which include India, Australia, Indonesia, Iran, Thailand, South Africa, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, UAE, Myanmar, Tanzania etc., together form an economic powerhouse generating among themselves an annual income of more than US\$ 7 trillion. As the former UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon had articulated in propagating the compelling vision of a “United States of Asia” in 2007, the Indian Ocean Region has the potential to transform itself into a free trade zone, and may even work towards adopting a common currency.

The region has immense geostrategic and geopolitical significance. It is home to 2 billion people spanning three continents - Africa, Asia and Oceania, with three strategic naval chokepoints at the

Strait of Hormuz, Bal-el-Mandeb and the Strait of Malacca, connecting the Indian Ocean Region with the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and the South China Sea respectively. The Indian Ocean accounts for the transportation of the highest tonnage of goods in the world, with almost 120,000 ships transiting its expanse annually, carrying two-thirds of the world's oil shipments, one-third of bulk cargo traffic and half the world's container shipments. It accounts for more than 20 percent of the global trade. An estimated 40 percent of the world's offshore oil production comes from the Indian Ocean.

The IORARC, which is the only pan-Indian ocean grouping that brings together diverse countries from three continents, had its origin in the 1990s, thanks to the initiatives taken by India and South Africa. It was set up in 1997 with the stated objectives of economic cooperation for sustainable growth and balanced development, and liberalisation and removal of impediments towards freer trade with free flow of goods, services, investment, and technology within the Indian Ocean rim. The apex body of the IORARC is the Council of Foreign Ministers of the member countries. Its Secretariat is located at Port Louis, Mauritius, which is probably not the best place to exploit its full potential.

As Jivanta Schöttli from the South Asia Institute of Heidelberg University had pointed out, the forum had suffered from a lack of visionary leadership and various other drawbacks since inception. The sheer diversity in geography, culture and economic development of the members made it somewhat an unwieldy entity. The track record indeed has very little to show in terms of tangible gains achieved. Projects taken up had either faded away or collapsed, in the process leaving a number of parallel organisations, like the Indian Ocean Rim Academic Group, the Indian Ocean Rim Business Forum and the Working Group on Trade and Investment whose only job purportedly is to provide inputs to the apex body of the fledging organisation.

The three players who could have made a difference are India, South Africa and Australia. As Schöttli pointed out, Australia's enthusiasm dwindled after the second ministerial conference in Maputo in 1999 had ruled out voluntary trade liberalisation. South Africa's priority shifted towards African organisations after the election of Thabo Mbeki as president. India's interest waned as the forum failed to open up new regional space to stimulate investment and trade. The irrelevance of the forum was highlighted when the tsunami of 2004 had failed to elicit any large scale cooperation for relief and rehabilitation of the thousands of hapless victims. Other groups and events have since taken over – BRICS, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, developments in the South China Sea areas. The forum is now practically dysfunctional and nothing is known of its activities except occasional meetings. Hardly covered by media, it could never generate much interest among the Indian intelligentsia and most are oblivious of its existence or purpose. The forum needs to be invigorated.

In recent years there has been a reorientation of our strategic focus in foreign relations in which the essential elements are maritime security, modernisation of Indian Navy and co-operation with major naval powers such as the United States, Japan and Australia, while asserting our presence in Indian Ocean only as a 'catalyst for peace, tranquility and stability'. But rules of the game are changing slowly, in a marked departure from the past when benign rhetoric used to define and determine our policy on the Indian Ocean. The 26/11 Mumbai carnage in 2008 rattled us into reckoning and revising the Maritime Doctrine first formulated in 2004. The doctrine revised in 2009 highlighted threats arising from maritime terrorism, piracy, coastal security and the heavy presence of extra-regional forces including the world's most powerful fleets in the Indian Ocean to safeguard their strategic interests.

It identified, among the primary elements of our maritime doctrine, the oil wealth of Persian Gulf region which is home to seven million expatriate Indians, the importance of key chokepoints in the Indian Ocean, while the Southern Indian Ocean Region, including Antarctica, South and East China Seas, Western Pacific Ocean and the Mediterranean were identified among the secondary areas of our maritime interest.

Weariness about China's aggressive naval expansion and the fear of being surrounded by the so called "String of pearls" – the network of Chinese military and commercial facilities and its muscle-flexing in the Indian Ocean Region led India to forge closer maritime ties with USA and Japan, and emboldened it into active engagement with Vietnam in a "comprehensive strategic partnership". It was a stark departure from our favoured policy of non-alignment we had practiced for decades without much tangible result.

It must be remembered that India's public and private-sector companies, especially in oil and power sectors, have heavily invested in foreign countries such as Sudan, Yemen, Iran, Iraq and Myanmar. Security of such investments and considerations of our energy security, given that 80 percent of our oil imports are routed across the Indian Ocean, will continue to dominate our maritime policy demanding robust naval capabilities, and not only for deterrence purposes. Equally important are commercial considerations and safety to our trade vessels negotiating the Ocean.

Prime Minister Modi had also repeatedly underlined that the Indian Ocean Region is one of India's 'foremost policy priorities', while projecting a vision for 'SAGAR' which means Ocean and stands for "Security And Growth for All in the Region". India is now ready to mark its presence in the wider Indo-Pacific region and may even consider building military bases outside. India's interest in developing the Chabahar port in Iran is a reflection of this new-found determination to break from the passivity and hesitations of past. But we need a vibrant organisation to back up and stimulate these efforts, so as to optimise the outcomes. This is why IORARC needs to actively and energetically engaged with.